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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN'S LAKE SAREZ- IS HYDROPOWER THE ANSWER?

¶1. Ten years after the First International Conference on Lake Sarez Problems in 1997, the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (Central Asia Office) and the Government of Tajikistan's Committee on Emergencies and Civil Defense conducted the Second International Conference on Lake Sarez Problems May 22-23. Conference participants recommended three steps in order to mitigate a disaster at Lake Sarez including: 1) conduct a feasibility study for construction of a downstream hydropower station; 2) lower the lake's water level through hydropower development; 3) conduct an assessment of dam safety in Tajikistan with the aim of implementing monitoring and early warning systems throughout the country. Participants included Tajik geologists and seismologists and a panel of experts from Germany, Norway and the international donor community, most notably the World Bank, a supporter of Lake Sarez projects. The panel supported the conference's recommendations.

¶2. Scientists continue to warn against the dangers of Lake Sarez, created after a powerful earthquake in 1911. Researchers believe that the Usoy Dam, formed during the earthquake, is eroding away and another large earthquake could mean its destruction. Some geologists predict that the next big earthquake in this seismically active region could occur soon, 100 years after the last big one. If the dam breaks, the lake's water would flood downstream, causing massive damage to villages and agriculture and endangering lives. The devastation could reach all the way to communities in Uzbekistan. USAID and other international donors have funded research and implemented early warning systems for communities that would be first affected by potential flooding. Government officials and the panel of experts praised the early warning system and are confident that it will help save lives, should a disaster occur.

¶3. PolOff met with Goulsara Pulatova June 1 to discuss conference participants' recommendations. Pulatova, a senior advisor at the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, pointed out that Tajik President Rahmon is keen to develop Lake Sarez's hydropower potential and is giving it high priority. Two to three weeks before the conference, Rahmon delivered a public speech calling for solutions to mitigate a potential disaster at Lake Sarez, one idea being to build a pipeline from Lake Sarez to Iran to supply its people with pure drinking water. (Comment: We hope someone will advise Rahmon that this idea is a bit of a stretch. End Comment.)

¶4. Scientists working with the Lake Sarez Risk Mitigation Project, supported by the World Bank, warn that before Tajikistan begins constructing hydropower stations on the Pyanj River, the government needs to ensure the Usoy Dam is stable. If the Usoy Dam containing Lake Sarez breaks and the river floods, downstream hydropower stations may suffer damage. Conference presenters advocated for additional research into the ever-changing geology of the lake. In the past two years, the water level has increased at an unprecedented rate and new holes in the dam have appeared. The water level of the dam could be lowered 100 meters by constructing a tunnel from the north bank of the lake. This would then allow for the construction of a 250-megwatt hydropower plant on the Murghab River.

¶5. Developing Tajikistan's hydropower potential has long topped Rahmon's agenda and the panel of experts support for the conference's recommendations adds fuel to his fire. The panel of experts estimated the feasibility study for this particular hydropower station would cost around $3 million and the station itself $120 million. (Comment: Considering that the costs for the similarly-sized Sangtuda--II hydropower station, located in a more accessible area are already $256 million, this figure appears unrealistically low. End Comment.) Pulatova said that the government is considering a loan for the project. She was optimistic the World Bank would be able to resolve the problem.

¶6. COMMENT: Helping to resolve the Lake Sarez threat could save lives and property, and we will continue to engage the Tajik government on practical, disaster-mitigating solutions. However, developing a hydropower station to use run-off from Lake Sarez may be several years down the road. Constructing a 250-megawatt power station where there are few roads and far from transmission lines would not draw in the private financing required for such an investment, and the World Bank would not be able to shoulder all the costs. Post will continue monitoring developments and report any concrete proposals or calls for funding from the government or other actors in order to identify

potential opportunities of cooperation. END COMMENT.
JACOBSON